THE POWER OF WEAKNESS
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Psalm 27
John 2:13-22
1 Corinthians 1:18-25

"For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,
and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."
1 Corinthians 1:25 (NRSV)

Where can we go, what can we do, O God, but come to you? And so we come this morning in humility and in grief, in fear—but also, O God, in hope because we would trust your providence and your grace. So startle us, again, with the truth of your love and your power revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

First, a word about why I'm here and Joanna is not. Frankly, I'd rather not be here, I'd rather listen to her preach on this important day in the life of our nation and our churches. We talked about it—the fact that she was in the middle of a very important series of sermons on the Ten Commandments—and we talked about the fact that we both take very seriously Karl Barth's dictum that the preacher ought to have an open Bible in one hand and an open newspaper in the other, and everyone knows what's in the newspaper this morning. So it was a strong leadership decision and a very gracious gesture when she announced to me that we were going to adjust the schedule and that both co-pastors should be in the pulpit during these critical days, that I should preach this Sunday and she will preach next Sunday, and she has promised to resume the series on "Finding a Moral Center" in the near future.

So, if you drove a long distance to hear Joanna preach on the Ten Commandments, I apologize.

Every preacher in the land is in a predicament this morning. Our nation is at war, and every one of the people in our pews this morning has a deeply held conviction about whether that is a good and necessary thing or a not-so-good, maybe even a bad thing. Or—and they may be the majority—they aren't quite sure where to come down: on the one hand they don't like the idea of American and British forces invading Iraq with a coalition of the willing while most of the world watches in dismay or anger, but on the other hand they conclude that something had to be done and maybe it is

ultimately good that we are willing to do it. And it is not unreasonable to assume that everybody—each one—would like a little support from the pulpit this morning.

That's the dilemma. You can't ignore it, and no matter what you say, someone is going to be unhappy. And it is deepened by the preacher's aim to be prophetic, to articulate God's Word and God's vision for humankind in the face of difficult political circumstances. In the process, it's a temptation for all of us—not just the preacher—to confuse our own personal political convictions with God's truth. A great preacher and teacher of preaching, Ernie Campbell observed the tendency of the preacher to craft and deliver masterful homilies addressed to the president, the secretary of state, and the chief justice of the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, Campbell noted, those persons are probably not in the pews this Sunday. Who are in the pews are people who have different opinions, different political priorities, different convictions about whatever public issue is on the agenda, all of whom are hoping for some support or at least some light—from God's Word preferably, not merely the preacher's agenda—to be shed on the topic.

On two separate occasions I have voiced my opposition to unilateral American action against Iraq that ignores the joint security apparatus and the treaties and structures that have kept something of the peace since 1945. I have publicly expressed my hope for my country to act like a partner among nations and build a safe and secure and peaceful future for the world—for my children and my grandchildren. I have not changed my mind about that, and precisely because I have a Bible open in one hand and the newspaper in the other, I am convinced more than ever that we and the world deserve better from our government, not the men and women of our armed forces who are magnificently doing what they are supposed to do with great courage and self-sacrifice and devotion to country that I find powerfully inspiring.

I am persuaded that the issue is now how our unprecedented power should be used in the future and that the churches are responsible to be one of the places where that conversation must take place. For now, today, the issue is no longer should we go to war. The issue for Christians is what next? And how to think about the new situation in which we find ourselves within the context of our faith. Thomas Friedman wrote what I thought was a particularly good editorial in the *New York Times* last Wednesday, voicing his disagreement with our approach, our unilateral approach to foreign policy, our refusal to join international environmental protocols, our withdrawal from long-standing arms limitation agreements, our virtual abandonment of the international effort to bring peace to Israel and Palestine and to end Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and establish an independent Palestinian state. Our failure to build very much of a coalition to go to war in Iraq, which Friedman believes, in itself, is

necessary. “Our children’s future hinges on doing this right, even if we got here wrong,” he wrote.

How the world—the future—will be for our children and grandchildren, the children of America and Iraq and Israel and Palestine, is the issue before us, I believe.

In the meantime, we live in the midst of jarring contrasts and considerable irony: all day yesterday flipping channels between ESPN and CNN from the NCAA playoffs to combat in south Iraq, presented almost like entertainment, a video game, a new March Madness. Contrast and irony: our government tells us to go about our lives normally but be watchful and alert to the possibility of terrorism, to proceed with our lives but to keep the duct tape and plastic sheeting handy just in case. In one 24-hour period in the middle of last week, I experienced it all. Because of my own opinion about the war, I telephoned a friend whom I knew to be thoughtfully supportive of the administration’s policy and asked for a conversation. Over breakfast my friend laid it out for me. We live in a violent world. We know that now in a way we didn’t before 9/11. Saddam Hussein has material that he shouldn’t have (never mind the fact that we gave some of it to him), has shown the willingness to use it in Iran and against his own people, has ignored the UN, and is tied to dangerous global networks that mean to do us harm. Why is it not the height of responsibility to see that and respond to it before 9/11 happens again? It was a good conversation. We agreed to disagree. And then I walked back to the church and discovered in the cloister along Michigan Avenue the figures of three human bodies drawn on the concrete sidewalk, with lots of blood—ketchup and chocolate syrup actually—and the words “Peace, Not War.” And then later, the irony continued as I sat at my desk writing out a prayer to be translated into Korean for our guests—the choir and dancers from the Myung Sung Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea, a church with 60,000 members, by the way—the choir was scheduled to sing a concert in our sanctuary, and while I wrote the prayer for international understanding and goodwill, I heard the sirens and crowd noise of the huge antiwar demonstration that shut down Lake Shore Drive and Michigan Avenue and made the concert an unusual event for the small audience that found a way to get in here at 8:00 p.m. on Wednesday, not to mention for our Korean guests.

In the meantime, we have been praying daily for the service people whose names you have sent us, and in the process, we discovered that two members of our congregation, Jim Oleen and Mike Koolidge, are both in the Army, stationed in Kuwait, and may now be in Iraq. Amazingly Jim and Mike bumped into each other, got to talking, and discovered that they were both from Chicago and belonged to the same church on Michigan Avenue. Jim Oleen’s last e-mail contained this:

> Thanks for keeping us both in your prayers. Mike said the chapel on base was packed on Sunday, and our Bible study helps a lot of us cope. Things are quiet right now . . . I guess it's the calm before the storm. We're all very anxious to get this all started and over with so we can get back home.

And then this remarkable thought:

> I know we'll do well out there, but it sure is sobering to think of the other side and the losses they are bound to take. Please pray for their souls too.

"Love your enemies," Jesus said, "pray for them" (Matthew 5:44).

The conversation we need to have now is about power and its responsible use—from our perspective, its faithful use in the context of what the Bible says. As a matter of fact, the Bible says something astounding about power: namely that there is power in weakness, real power. "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." Paul was writing to the people of the Christian community in the Greek city of Corinth, who were generally making a mess of things, arguing, trying to out-maneuver each other, dividing up into groups, lobbies, single-issue groups attacking one another, trying to out-power each other. Real power, Paul said, is found in weakness, in vulnerability. Try that out, he said, the power of God—not in some muscular display of potency, but the suffering of the cross, the crucified Christ.

The issue before us is about power. We have a lot of it, more than anyone has ever had. We have more military power than the next seventeen nations in the world combined. Our military power spans the globe. And so in the last year or so, as we have gradually awakened to the new situation, some have begun to talk about an American empire—not whether it is a good idea or not so good, but that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it simply is. And the critical question is how to act. How to exercise the power we have.

Robert Bellah is a scholar who has thought very provocatively about our national life, about American culture and religion and behavior. He wrote an article for the *Christian Century* recently, "Righteous Empire," in which he observed:

> The U.S. has enormous power, more than any nation has ever had—probably more than is good for any nation to have. Power in itself is not bad. The question is what kind of power. Careful power is

> moderate and restrained, always thoughtful of consequences, always concerned that it nurture, not destroy.

And then Bellah, a faithful and very thoughtful believer, went on:

> The Christian tradition is rooted in the idea that God in Christ is the very exemplum of careful power. [Power that is moderate, restrained, weighs consequences and nurtures, not destroys.]

It's at the very heart of our faith, this radical idea that real power subjects itself to the restraints of love. In the biggest, broadest sense, the real question has always been not simply is there a God, but how does an all-powerful God relate to us, to human history? How does God's power work? Is God in control? Does God plan and orchestrate the whole drama down to the smallest, most trivial detail? That's power. Many believe it or at least want to—that everything that happens is God's powerful plan, from your birth to the death of your loved ones, to the parking space you miraculously encountered on Rush Street this morning. God, as Michelangelo painted him on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, muscular like Zeus, stretched out across the heavens—great art, terrible theology.

The Christian tradition presents a very different idea of God and God's power, God's relationship to human life. Michelangelo caught it, in another work of art, outside the Sistine Chapel, near the entrance to St. Peter's over along the side wall. It's much better theology than the Sistine Chapel. It's a sculpture called the Pieta, the lifeless body of Jesus cradled in the arms of his beautifully serene mother. Christ crucified, the power of God.

How, after all, does that muscular God who is in control of everything relate to your life and mine, particularly when things aren't going so well? What does human suffering mean if your God is always powerfully in control? It must mean that God is responsible for your suffering or doesn't care. God aloof from it all, up there flexing his biceps on the chapel ceiling.

New Testament scholar Charles Cousar asks, "How do we know God . . . in the routine of daily schedule or the chaos of family life, or in the more ambiguous confusion of world events? Particularly in dark, tragic moments, what reason is there to expect God to be involved?"

In the midst of tragedy, in the valley of the shadow of death, we—you and I—almost instinctively hold on to the cross of Christ, not a powerful display of divine potency, not a finely honed theological argument, not even a creed or confession or a whole Book of Confessions, but a cross, Christ crucified, the power of God.

That's a God who is lovingly present in life, our lives, a God who knows what it means to be human, a God who knows what it is to hurt physically, spiritually, a God who knows what it means to laugh and experience joy and passion, a God who draws near to you and me and weeps our tears with us and sometimes for us.

What does God think about the war? What would Jesus do? "Who would Jesus bomb?" a sign at the antiwar rally asked. To some there are very clear, uncomplicated answers. The only answer of which I am certain is that God is disappointed, and God is present with American combat troops and Iraqi soldiers, that God weeps when they are wounded and when they die. What I know for sure is that American men and women and children are precious to God and so are Iraqi men and women and children and that God weeps and will be lovingly and powerfully present in the days ahead.

And what I do know is that the cross of Christ is the sign of God's presence in our lives at their most basic and most human. Jesus came to Jerusalem—to the political and economic and military center of his nation's life. He went to the temple and confronted the commercial interests that used religion for profit. He engaged in what Susan Thistlethwaite, President of Chicago Theological Seminary, called the first Christian act of civil disobedience. And the point is that God comes that close. God is that intimately involved with human life, with your life and mine.

So whatever personal conclusion we reach about this war, we can know that God is in the middle of it, that God's Son laid down his own life to demonstrate the lengths God will go to be with us.

And that when the time comes for us to face the worst that can happen—

the end of the world as we knew it and loved it
the loss of a job or a relationship
the loss of your health
the death of a child, a parent, a spouse, a beloved

—when that time comes, we will not be abandoned.

And so in the days ahead, through whatever will happen, we also will be traveling a Lenten journey, a journey that will end, pause actually for a while, on a hill outside a major city where a young man will die, put to death quickly and efficiently and easily by powerful politicians and military and religious forces, a young man whose cross is for us, the very power of God to be with us and the whole world with healing and redeeming love, Christ crucified, the power of God. All praise to him. Amen.